Teaching (with) Visuals:

Some Thoughts on Images and the EFL Classroom

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This essay attempts a preliminary inquiry into the semiotic function of visual images in the language classroom, utilizing the lens of visual culture studies. It takes as a foundational premise the notion that images are a form of communication. Though language teachers frequently integrate photographs, artwork, advertisements, and other kinds of images into their lessons, they tend to ignore the specific form of the visual message. Drawing on the visual semiotics of Roland Barthes, I will show how the culturally encoded meanings present in all images exert an influence over their use in the language class. I also claim that overemphasis on an image's literal content runs the risk of reifying stereotypes and inhibiting intercultural competence, while a critical awareness of these properties can conversely aid the cultural goals of language education.

The Image as Communication

Images may serve any number of purposes in a language class. They may provide concrete examples for vocabulary building. They may elicit descriptive sentences. They may start a discussion by depicting controversial behavior, or present to the students a visible instance of a foreign custom. In addition, commercial textbooks are replete with pictures, and not only for pedagogical use. Characters, staged emotions or interactions, and even decorations give the lesson a human face, rendering the language material more palatable to the learner. In all these examples we notice a secondary status accorded to images. They are considered learning aids, tools deployed in order to create opportunities for the students to speak. For most language teachers, images are mere stepping stones on the way towards language. Images play far more active roles in our lives outside the classroom, yet after entering a lesson plan they have a disappointing tendency to become dead objects.

This disservice is understandable; the point is so obvious that one tends to forget. However, we should remember that *images are another form of communication*. They are messages created to transmit information. One need not repeat the cliché about words and pictures to observe that images can in fact transmit certain kinds of information far better than language can. This property informs a great many of their classrooms uses. Images communicate what would take too long to explain with words, what would involve grammar constructions above the class level, what might distract from the primary goal, or what words could intellectually explain but not emotionally convey. Furthermore, images speak more quickly and intensely than words do. Teachers tap into this power when they use images to "liven up" their lessons or secure the students' interest.

Images also elicit language. The two exist side by side in society, complementing each other's messages. In Japan especially, warning signs, instructional manuals, brochures, and even government documents make use of the interrelation between the two mediums. This is of course the primary reason language teachers use them. When an image is deployed in the classroom, its contents are necessarily translated into verbal communication. We see an image, and we begin to talk about it. The teacher's task is to choose and present the image in such a way that it will lead to the desired speech practice. In the language classroom, the deployed image tells the student, "Here is what you are supposed to say."

Perhaps because of this practice, where the image's communication is regulated to flow into a specific instance of language production, we tend to suppose that the image *needs* the language to communicate. As we have said, images communicate as potently as language. But these two kinds of communication differ greatly. On the one hand, images are intensely more literal, since the contents of the image *show* the message to the recipient. But the depiction is not the full message. We often remark on how cultural values influence the structure of a given language, but this applies to images on a far grander scale. From creation, through selection and deployment, and finally to reception, images trigger historically determined conceptions of ideology, culture, lifestyle choice, and taste. The visual semiotics of Roland Barthes show how these elements turn images into highly persuasive forms of cultural rhetoric.

Barthes and the Rhetoric of the Image

Barthes explains that on the literal level a photograph is "a message without a code" (Barthes 17). A photograph does not break a message down into signifying units like a language does. The photographic image is analogous to the thing it represents, which gives the viewer the impression that reality is being *re-presented* to them. This is that great obviousness which causes us to use photographs in class without recognizing them as communication. Drawings, paintings, and other reproduced images also have this analogic function, though Barthes insists on a difference of degree between them and photographs, since the viewer understands that a measure of style has contributed to the reproduction. Artists make purposeful choices in their representation of reality, and the viewer knows that they do. The photograph, on the other hand, appears as a captured reality, giving it a powerful immediacy that has the effect of shutting down interpretation (45). If the object is there, we have no need to explain it. This sense of presence inherent in images, specifically photography, obscures the fact that no image is actually arbitrary. Images enter the social realm through specific human motivations, both in their deployment and in their content. This interplay between the natural obviousness of sight and the hidden meanings of culture forms the structure of the image's communication.

Barthes distinguishes between the *literal* or *denotative* message of a visual image and its *symbolic* or *connotative* message (Barthes 36). The former refers to the image's representation of the thing depicted, the analogous re-presentation of reality described above. In contrast, the symbolic message refers to the plurality of culturally determined meanings associated with the depiction. These, Barthes explains, are encoded; they represent a set of

learned concepts. The symbolic codes can be present in objects, angles, poses, or relationships of the elements within the image. Stylized image forms like painting might manipulate these codes toward a unique message, but those appearing in daily social life such as newspaper photos or advertisements will simply reproduce the cultural ideology of their creators (31).

However, the symbolic message and the literal message can never actually appear separately, since they are simultaneously present in the same object. In this, Barthes claims, lies the persuasive rhetoric of the image. The denoted message "naturalizes" the connoted message:

> The discontinuous connotators are connected, actualized, "spoken" through the syntagm of the denotation, the discontinuous world of symbols plunges into the story of the denoted scene as though into a lustral bath of innocence.
>
> (Barthes 51)

The symbolic message acts like a kind of parasite, latching onto the literal elements and their aura of immediate presence. The historical and cultural perceptions contained in the symbolic message are thus able to be positioned as eternal and natural "reality." In addition, Barthes notes that in addition to the literal and symbolic message, images in the social world usually contain a linguistic message as well, for example in newspapers captions or in advertisements. Barthes claims that in this relationship the text serves to "anchor" the symbolic content of the pictorial message (38-39). Naturally polysemous, images can refer to a wider range of concepts and catalyze a larger array of emotions than words. The linguistic message, in effect, limits the play of signification within the image and guides the viewer to a meaning chosen in advance.

Barthes's choice of the word "rhetoric" to describe the semiology of the image stems from this deceptive persuasion inherent in visual communication. Their direct representation of supposed reality masks not only the message, but the fact that a message exists at all. Barthes notes that this process "disintellectualizes" the image. Whereas a purely linguistic message – a sales pitch, a political speech – catalyzes the interpretive process and opens the possibility of critical analysis, the image's solid base "in nature" quietly assures the listener that no analysis is necessary. Images thus flow through the fabric of society, embedding in reality a myriad of covert purposes.

The Image as Cultural Communicator

Barthes's visual semiotics reminds us that no image is ever innocent. Their creation and deployment always serve a purpose. This is as true in the language classroom as anywhere else, where we direct the image towards our goal of eliciting speech from our students. In this endeavor we language teachers tend to focus exclusively on its literal message. We *want* the image simply to be what it represents so that it can become language in the classroom. When we gloss over the symbolic content, we ignore – and thus are more susceptible to – the multiple interpretive practices at work, where the image we choose for the task also chooses us.

Imagine that for a coming lesson I want to find a photo of a couple eating. After scrolling through a hundred or so Google images I choose one. Why that one? Certainly there

are logistical choices involved; the picture may be clear, bright, at a good angle, or otherwise amenable to re-presenting the act of eating in a way that language learners can immediately apprehend. But in all probability, more forces are at work here. The photograph contains symbolic messages that set it apart from the others. Something in its makeup has triggered a culturally conditioned response. Perhaps the food reminds me of home, which presents the opportunity to give the students a taste of life in my corner of the world. Perhaps the image shows an interracial couple, triggering positive connotations of diversity and progress that I subconsciously hope to impart to young people growing up in a homogeneous yet slowly diversifying society. Or perhaps – and this is the most worrisome – I perceive the food and the couple to be "the most normal" and choose it because it will presumably create the least friction in the classroom. These and many more connotative reactions occur as I choose the photo. These messages will all transfer to the class as well, surpassing the simple denotative message I am consciously aiming for. The photograph will not only be presenting a certain version of how humans interact with each other, but claiming that for that version the self-evident supremacy of nature itself. No image can be neutrally deployed. Handshakes in business textbooks are treatises on race, gender, and age. Pictures of clothes used for a lesson about shopping become consumer advice. Even a shot of a table in a room is commenting on the ideal image of a home. In the language classroom as much as (and perhaps more than) anywhere else, images are always saying more than we mean them to.

This heavy burden of transference does not mean that we should resist the use of images in the classroom, however. On the contrary, it is this very property that recommends them to contemporary language teaching. Claire Kramsch explains how teaching language has become "a social, cultural, historical adventure, because it is the study of language as a social practice" (Kramsch 204). This sociocultural approach to language study derives in part from the general recognition that language and content are not separate entities. Language and its education must convey themselves through some kind of material. This material has gradually shifted from supposedly neutral topics to active engagement with social and cultural issues. Building on these developments, language study has embraced the culturally embedded nature of language and now sees itself as a vehicle of cultural communication.

Images' symbolic messages make them ideal tools for the task. In the language class, there are actually (at least) two sets of cultural codes at work: mine and the students'. In the example above, the symbolic codes of two cultures – or at least my *perception* of the others' codes – were measured against each other for the purpose of a simple language lesson about eating. If deployed conscientiously, every visual becomes a chance to participate in an intercultural experience. A properly chosen image can elicit cultural information more subtly and efficiently than a reading assignment or lecture. Our photograph of the dining couple can tell the students about not only eating habits but also social relationships, fashion, and communication styles. These symbolic messages will resound with the students' own cultures, creating different identifications and contrasts within each individual. Furthermore, this process occurs on a more visceral level. The immediacy which Barthes characterizes as a danger may

actually be a boon to the language teacher. Students are able to engage with the sense of *having-been-there* images contain (Barthes 44), to simulate the exhilaration of contact. This pertains to illustrations as well, since they are products of another worldview. The language activity can then direct the students by means of this literal message – here are two people in a different country eating lunch – towards the symbolic meaning, the interpretation of life that the action contains.

Language can guide the symbolic meanings of images. The danger lurks in the way we treat this process of guidance. As a Barthesian glance might predict, it surfaces when we assume that the image is a pure re-presentation of reality. As has been mentioned, language teachers tend to employ images solely for their denotative content without considering what connotations they contain for themselves and for the students. This may amount to no more than a missed opportunity, but it also may amount to much more. We have given the students only the literal message, the brute objectivity of what is portrayed. On the symbolic side, we may have subjected them to cultural imperialism, presenting our view of reality as the most definitive. Or we may have left them at the mercy of preexisting stereotypes within their own cultural codes. An uncritically deployed image may well cause enough damage to negate whatever global competence was gained through the acquisition of the day's language point.

Lessons using images for the expressed purpose of teaching culture are not immune to these issues either. Racing to re-present a foreign reality to the students, it is easy to forget about the play of representation we have enacted. An image appears in a social role as the result of the aesthetic, ideological, and economic goals of at least one individual, and usually many more. Posing images as windows to faraway places merely repeats the same obsession with the denotation. Even if we have taken our cultural bias into account and predicted student response to the best degree, the overt presence of the image carries the risk of universalization. The students' perception of the culture becomes ossified, deadened to change and variation. An image of a folk dance can suspend a European country in an idyllic past unknown to the majority its actual citizens. Pictures of starving children have turned the whole continent of Africa into a backwater nightmare in Japanese students' minds, simply because their signification was not properly addressed. However, the damage here lies not so much in the specifics of the misjudgment but in the simple fact that no intercultural consciousness has been achieved. By ignoring the quiet systems of rhetoric that activate as an image moves from one culture to another, we have erased its inherent value as a tool of cultural communication.

Since what is at stake in images is nothing less than a student's picture of the world, a certain level of caution must be exercised. In many cases, images created *within* the paradigm of a given culture – illustrations, advertisements, self-portraits, fashion photos, etc. – can serve a discussion about a certain culture more faithfully and stimulatingly than a photograph taken by an observer. Another rule of thumb may be to find instances where a given cultural phenomenon is being called into question or is exhibiting signs of change. This will allow the students to learn about the phenomenon without illusions of its eternal attachment to the practitioners. However, principles like these cannot hope to apply to all or even most lesson goals. Nor are the

stakes equally high in all situations. However, photos of events, customs, or practices will always benefit from a little critical distance. As Barthes notes, words anchor the signification of images. Even the simple question, “Why did the photographer take this photo?” can prevent ossification of the content. Images used in this context must fulfill the function of framing culture as a dynamic process open to interpretation.

Conclusion: Teaching Images

This discussion has attempted to briefly illustrate the communicative and cultural forces at work when images are deployed in the language classroom. I have in no way intended to argue against using visuals in language lessons. Indeed, I hope to have shown their immense value as modes of classroom communication and as gateways to the discussion of culture. Referring to the work of Roland Barthes, I have also tried to indicate the need for both teachers and students to be aware of their symbolic power. Teachers must take care in the selection of images, and work to be transparent in regard to their motivations for using them in the classroom. In my advanced courses I teach visual analysis in its own right, where students practice uncovering the symbolic codes of art, advertisements, fashion, and other visual phenomena. I feel that these lessons develop a subtlety of communication that aids not only language study but social participation in general.

Of course, such intensive visual training is not conducive to most language courses. In classes without specific cultural or content goals, images will likely have less potential to exercise their rhetorical power. Almost nothing is at stake in using a picture of a bed to elicit the word “bed.” (Or is there? Do all/any of your students sleep in an oak frame?) This discussion has aimed less at specific moments than at general practice. A working knowledge of images’ functional capacity should inform our lesson planning, curriculum building, textbook writing, and in-class conversation. This final exhortation feeds into the larger purpose of my inquiry. The function of images is just one example of how the cultural question is always present in the language classroom. To address this presence, our teaching should strive to be informed by interdisciplinary topics in the human sciences. Examining these connections will leader to a greater, more dynamic role for language education at the university.

References

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